Architectural Design of Public Spaces in Realizing Good Urban Governance Based on Community Participation

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ABSTRACT

Urban governance in rapidly transforming cities is increasingly challenged by declining civic engagement, social polarization, and the commodification of public spaces, yet governance debates often overlook how spatial and architectural conditions shape the possibility of meaningful participation. This study aims to conceptualize how the architectural design of public spaces functions as a mediator of good urban governance by embedding principles of transparency, inclusivity, participation, and accountability into the material fabric of the city. Employing a qualitative descriptive design with a literature based approach, the research synthesizes 40 core sources selected from 75 initial publications spanning governance studies, urban design, spatial theory, and architecture. Through qualitative content analysis and thematic synthesis, the study identifies key linkages between spatial design elements such as openness, accessibility, flexibility of use, co-management, and adaptive reuse and governance outcomes related to civic trust, social cohesion, and participatory decision-making. Case illustrations from cities including Copenhagen, Bandung, Seoul, Cagliari, Luanda, and mid-sized Indonesian cities show that participatory and inclusive public space design can enhance collaborative governance, while exclusionary or heavily securitized spaces undermine it. The analysis also highlights constraints such as unequal participation, bureaucratic silos, limited resources, and risks of tokenistic engagement. The study concludes that architecture should be treated as governance infrastructure, public spaces must be planned, designed, and managed through participatory frameworks, co-governance mechanisms, and justice-oriented design guidelines so that governance principles are materially experienced in everyday urban life.

Keyword: Architectural Design, Public Space, Participatory Governance; Good Urban Governance, Civic Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Urban governance has increasingly emerged as a central topic in contemporary urban studies as cities transform into complex socio-spatial arenas

marked by dense political, economic, and cultural interaction. The quality of governance in these environments depends not only on institutional arrangements or administrative frameworks but also on how the physical city particularly public spaces is conceived, produced, and managed (Healey, 2010; Lefebvre, 1991). Public spaces such as parks, plazas, promenades, and community squares serve as material interfaces where citizenship is enacted, where democratic encounters take place, and where the relationship between citizens and governing institutions becomes visible. Within this perspective, architectural design is not merely an aesthetic or technical undertaking; it shapes how principles of good urban governance transparency, inclusivity, accountability, responsiveness are perceived, accessed, and lived in everyday urban life (Gehl, 2011; Carmona, 2019).

Despite growing scholarly attention to participatory governance and citizen engagement in urban policy (UN-Habitat, 2020; OECD, 2021), existing literature tends to prioritize institutional mechanisms such as collaborative planning, deliberative processes, or policy co-production. These studies predominantly analyze governance as a procedural and administrative process, while the spatial and architectural dimensions that enable or constrain participation remain comparatively under-examined. This disconnect creates an important conceptual gap: although governance frameworks articulate normative aspirations for inclusive and democratic processes, they often overlook the material conditions that determine whether such participation can occur meaningfully. This article seeks to address that gap by positioning architectural design as manifested in the form, accessibility, openness, and configurational logic of public spaces as a substantive instrument of participatory governance rather than a neutral backdrop.

The urgency of bridging this conceptual divide becomes more evident when considering the challenges faced by contemporary cities. Many rapidly growing urban areas experience declining civic engagement, increasing social polarization, and the commercialization or securitization of public spaces. In developing and middle-income cities, design decisions are frequently guided by aesthetic, commercial, or technocratic priorities rather than by democratic values or community needs (Low & Smith, 2006; Carr et al., 1992). Such spatial practices risk alienating citizens from the urban realm, weakening trust in public institutions, and diminishing the social foundations necessary for participatory governance. Since good urban governance requires transparency, inclusivity, responsiveness, and rule of law (UNDP, 1997), these values must not only exist in policy documents but also be materially embedded in the spatial organization of the city.

Existing studies on participatory governance provide important insights into stakeholder collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2008), co-production of policy (Innes & Booher, 2010), and community-based planning (Fung, 2006). Yet, these perspectives generally treat physical space as secondary or exogenous to governance processes. By contrast, research rooted in urban design and architectural theory argues that the physical environment fundamentally shapes social interaction, political agency, and everyday urban experience (Gehl, 2011; Madanipour, 2018; Carmona, 2019).

However, these design-oriented studies rarely integrate governance theory in a systematic manner. The novelty of this article lies in explicitly synthesizing these separate bodies of knowledge governance theory, spatial democracy, and architectural design to propose a conceptual understanding of architecture as a governance mediator. This represents a distinct contribution compared to

mainstream governance studies that examine participation primarily through institutional channels, and compared to urban design scholarship that often frames governance implicitly rather than analytically.

The right-to-the-city discourse (Lefebvre, 1991; Harvey, 2008) further highlights that participation and access are inherently spatial rights. Inclusive, accessible, diverse, and dialogic public spaces enable democratic practices and social belonging, while exclusionary, privatized, or securitized spaces may reproduce inequalities and undermine governance legitimacy (Mitchell, 2003). Therefore, the architectural dimension of governance involves more than physical design; it concerns the distribution of power, visibility, and agency within the city. Understanding this spatial dimension is critical to advancing governance frameworks that are not only institutionally robust but also experientially grounded.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to enrich the conceptual vocabulary of urban governance by integrating spatial perspectives. Through a qualitative, literature-based methodology, this article synthesizes interdisciplinary insights from governance studies (Rhodes, 1997; Kooiman, 2003), spatial and urban theory (Lefebvre, 1991; Whyte, 1980; Jacobs, 1961), and architectural and design scholarship (Gehl, 2011; Carmona, 2019). This integrative approach allows for a deeper understanding of public spaces as governance interfaces sites where citizens, institutions, and spatial form interact in ways that produce, reinforce, or contest governance outcomes. By conceptualizing architecture as both a reflection and an instrument of governance, the study advances a more holistic model of good urban governance that includes its spatial, social, and experiential dimensions.

Ultimately, the article argues that effective urban governance requires more than institutional reforms; it necessitates reconfiguring public spaces as participatory commons where democratic life can unfold. Public spaces that are designed through participatory processes do more than accommodate movement or recreation they foster civic trust, strengthen social cohesion, and legitimize governance practices through lived experience. By articulating how spatial design mediates governance values, this study expands the boundaries of governance research and invites further interdisciplinary inquiry into how architectural thinking can enhance the pursuit of inclusive, accountable, and resilient urban systems.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design using a literature-based or conceptual approach to examine how architectural design contributes to the realization of good urban governance through participatory public spaces. Instead of generating primary data, the research systematically reviews, compares, and synthesizes existing theories, conceptual models, and empirical findings from governance studies, urban design, spatial sociology, and architecture. This qualitative design enables a comprehensive interpretive understanding of how spatial form intersects with civic participation and governance practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The data consist entirely of secondary sources. A total of 75 publications were initially identified, comprising 52 peer-reviewed journal articles, 15 academic books, and 8 policy or institutional reports published between 2000 and 2024. Through a structured screening procedure, 40 core sources were selected. The narrowing of sources was based on (1) conceptual relevance, (2) theoretical

depth, and (3) methodological rigor, ensuring that only works offering substantial contributions to topics such as participatory urban design, public space governance, spatial democracy, and architectural mediation of civic engagement were included. Sources were obtained through systematic searches in Scopus, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar.

The collected literature was organized using Zotero to manage citation metadata and thematic clusters. Keyword searches included: public space governance, participatory urban design, spatial democracy, architectural governance, and good urban governance. Each publication was reviewed to extract key arguments, conceptual structures, and analytical propositions relevant to the study.

Data analysis employed qualitative content analysis combined with thematic synthesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was performed to identify recurring themes related to governance principles, spatial openness, design-mediated participation, and architectural expressions of accountability. Thematic interpretation enabled a nuanced examination of how spatial design functions as a governance mechanism. Cross-disciplinary comparison between governance theory and architectural design thinking informed the development of a conceptual model linking spatial configuration to participatory governance.

Epistemologically, the study is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which assumes that understandings of governance and spatial participation are socially and discursively produced (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Accordingly, a hermeneutic reading of texts was adopted to interpret the assumptions, meanings, and analytical orientations embedded within academic discussions.

Although no human participants were involved, ethical standards in academic research were observed by ensuring transparent citation, accurate representation of ideas, and avoidance of plagiarism. Should the framework be extended into empirical fieldwork, ethical clearance would be requested from an Institutional Review Board (IRB). To enhance validity and trustworthiness, triangulation of sources and theoretical cross-checking were continuously applied. The combination of conceptual clarity, consistent inclusion criteria, and methodological transparency strengthens the reliability of findings and facilitates future replication or extension by other scholars.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
1. Architectural Design of Public Spaces as a Medium of Good Urban Governance

The literature review reveals that the architectural design of public spaces plays a vital role in realizing the principles of good urban governance through inclusivity, transparency, participation, and accountability. This relationship is not merely aesthetic but deeply political and social, positioning architecture as a mediator of governance processes. The findings indicate that spatial design, when conceived through participatory principles, becomes a medium through which citizens experience governance in their daily lives. Empirical examples from cities such as Copenhagen, Bandung, and Seoul show that open, accessible, and collectively shaped public spaces often correlate with higher levels of civic trust and social cohesion.

Recent studies highlight that public spaces serve as a physical manifestation of governance practices. Ntakana, Mbanga, and Mosiea (2025) emphasize that contemporary discourse increasingly prioritizes inclusivity and justice. This aligns with cases such as the revitalization of Taman Fatahillah, Jakarta, where improved

spatial openness and pedestrian prioritization strengthened public visibility and civic engagement. Similarly, Vallance et al. (2025) describe the governance of public space as a form of "commoning," which resonates with the collaborative management model seen in Seoul's Cheonggyecheon Stream, where ecological restoration and participatory stewardship enhanced public trust.

Table 1. Relationship Between Architectural Design Elements and Good Urban Governance Principles

Architectural Design Element	Governance Principle Reflected	Description / Impact
Spatial Openness (e.g., plazas, transparent facades)	Transparency	Enables visual access and symbolic openness between citizens and institutions
Accessibility (pedestrian paths, ramps, signage)	Inclusivity	Promotes universal access regardless of age, gender, or ability
Flexible Use of Space	Participation	Allows community events, civic discussions, and cultural exchange
Co-managed Public Spaces	Accountability	Encourages joint responsibility between government and citizens
Adaptive Reuse of Urban Sites	Responsiveness	Reflects adaptive governance that revitalizes neglected areas based on public needs

Source: Author, 2025

At the same time, the literature cautions that design alone cannot guarantee democratic outcomes. Spatial configurations that appear open and inclusive can still be governed through top-down security regimes, commercial regulations, or event programming that subtly exclude certain groups. Studies on "sanitized" or highly controlled plazas in European and Asian cities show how surveillance technologies, privatized management, and consumption-oriented zoning can limit spontaneous assembly and dissent, even in spaces branded as public and participatory. In this regard, the alignment between architectural intentions, regulatory frameworks, and everyday governance practices becomes crucial. Public space design contributes to good urban governance only when planning regulations, institutional mandates, and managerial routines actively protect rights to access, express, and assemble, especially for marginalized communities.

Furthermore, recent debates underscore the need to embed public space design within broader frameworks of social justice, environmental resilience, and digital governance. Climate-sensitive design strategies such as shading, green infrastructure, and flood-adaptive landscapes are increasingly interpreted as expressions of the state's responsibility to safeguard collective well-being, particularly in climate-vulnerable cities of the Global South. In parallel, the integration of digital tools like participatory mapping platforms, QR-based feedback systems, and open data dashboards can enhance transparency and citizen oversight over public space projects when deployed inclusively. These developments suggest that the architectural design of public spaces functions most effectively as a medium of good urban governance when it is conceived not only as a physical intervention but as part of an integrated governance ecosystem that links spatial form, institutional reform, and civic empowerment.

2.   Openness and Participatory Design in Democratic Urban Governance
    Architectural openness manifested through spatial permeability, walkability, and visual transparency has consistently been associated with public trust. Public squares and parks that emphasize legibility and accessibility, such as Federation Square (Melbourne) or Alun-Alun Bandung, demonstrate how design can signal openness and institutional accountability. Conversely, exclusionary redevelopment projects or privatized pseudo-public spaces, observed in parts of Kuala Lumpur and Manila, often reduce citizens' sense of belonging.
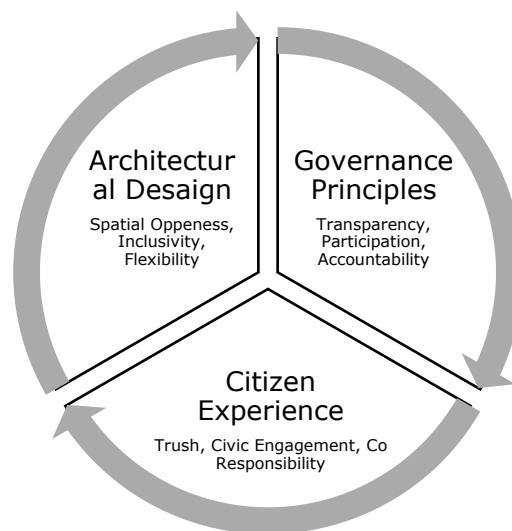

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Architecture as a Mediator of Governance
Source: Author, 2025

    A strong convergence between architecture and governance also emerges in the literature on participatory design. Carmona et al. (2024) described the evolving role of public architects as coalition builders who mediate between government institutions, private developers, and local citizens. This approach reframes the architect's role from that of a designer of form to that of a facilitator of governance processes. The design governance model recognizes that involving citizens in design workshops, participatory planning, and co-creation processes produces not only more functional public spaces but also stronger social ownership and legitimacy in governance outcomes. In other words, participatory design is both a spatial and political act that fosters active citizenship.
    From the governance perspective, the spatial dimension of participation is equally important. When citizens are invited to engage directly in the design and use of public spaces, they do not merely occupy those spaces they exercise their right to the city (Harvey, 2008) and contribute to the realization of democratic governance. The spatial form of a city can thus be understood as a record of its governance culture. Inclusive design practices such as universal access, multi-generational usability, and gender-sensitive layouts embody social justice principles within the physical structure of the city. Studies from mid-sized Indonesian cities (Zubaidi et al., 2024).

3.   Public Spaces as Interfaces of Collaborative Urban Governance
    The reviewed literature also underscores that public spaces act as interfaces of governance, connecting citizens, institutions, and the physical environment. Garau et al. (2025) demonstrated how the adaptive reuse of residual

urban areas in Cagliari transformed neglected sites into vibrant social hubs that enhance civic engagement. Such transformations represent the tangible outcomes of collaborative governance. Similarly, Inglês (2022) found in Luanda that inclusive public spaces enhance social cohesion and serve as effective instruments for revitalizing urban life in developing contexts. These examples reinforce the notion that spatial design and governance should not operate in isolation: architecture provides the setting where governance values are materialized and experienced.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Case Studies on Public Space Governance

City / Case Study	Governance Approach	Key Design Strategy	Outcome / Impact
Cagliari, Italy	Adaptive reuse	Transformation of neglected sites into civic hubs	Enhanced civic engagement and urban vitality
Luanda, Angola	Inclusive planning	Open-access public plazas	Increased social cohesion
Bengkulu & Malang, Indonesia	Community-based planning	Integration of local culture and participatory workshops	Prevented elitist design, improved local own

Source: Author, 2025

An essential theme arising from the literature is that the effectiveness of urban governance depends on how well spatial design embodies participatory principles. Cities that treat design as a governance tool through community-driven urban design, co-management of public spaces, and participatory budgeting tend to exhibit stronger social trust and civic resilience. This aligns with the argument by Fung (2006) that collaborative participation increases legitimacy and policy efficiency. Spatial design therefore becomes both a governance mechanism and a civic infrastructure that enables democratic dialogue.

In theoretical terms, integrating governance studies with spatial theory introduces a novel conceptual lens: governance as a spatial practice. This means that governance values such as inclusivity, transparency, and accountability should not only be expressed in policies but also materialized in spatial form. The New Urban Agenda and recent urban planning literature (Carmona et al., 2024; Vallance et al., 2025) reiterate the need for public space networks that support inclusive, sustainable, and resilient cities.

Practically, the implications are significant. Urban policies should explicitly recognize public space design as a strategic component of governance. This includes integrating co-design processes, monitoring the inclusivity of spatial environments, and evaluating public spaces not merely on aesthetic or economic grounds but based on their social and governance functions. Cities that have adopted participatory spatial planning frameworks show improved civic trust, reduced conflict over land use, and more sustainable management of public assets (Ntakana et al., 2025).

4.   Challenges and Constraints in Implementing Participatory Spatial Governance

Despite these positive developments, challenges remain. Unequal participation persists, as marginalized groups often lack the capacity or representation to influence spatial decisions. Moreover, institutional silos between planners, architects, and governance bodies hinder effective collaboration. In

developing cities, limited infrastructure and financial resources also restrict the implementation of participatory design processes (Inglês, 2022). These challenges suggest that participatory governance in architecture must go beyond symbolic gestures toward institutionalized and inclusive frameworks that guarantee equitable representation in spatial decision-making. The key challenges identified in implementing participatory spatial governance, along with possible solutions proposed in the reviewed studies, are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of Key Challenges in Participatory Spatial Governance

Challenge	Description	Proposed Solution
Unequal participation	Marginalized groups excluded from decision-making processes	Institutionalize inclusive participation frameworks
Bureaucratic silos	Poor coordination among agencies and limited interdepartmental collaboration	Establish cross-sectoral governance platforms
Limited resources	Insufficient funds and technical capacity to support participatory processes	Promote community partnerships and incremental implementation

Source: Author, 2025

Overall the findings and discussions reaffirm that public space design is not a peripheral concern but a central dimension of good urban governance. Through participatory and inclusive architectural practices, cities can translate governance principles into everyday experiences of openness, equity, and cooperation. This spatial turn in governance studies not only bridges disciplinary divides but also offers a pragmatic pathway toward cities that are both well-designed and democratically governed.

At the same time, the literature also warns of the risk of "participation fatigue" and tokenism, particularly when communities are repeatedly invited to consultations that have little impact on final outcomes. When participatory processes are poorly facilitated, overly technical, or scheduled in ways that conflict with residents' everyday livelihoods, they can inadvertently reproduce exclusions rather than mitigate them. In many cases, civil society organizations, neighborhood associations, and informal community leaders bear a disproportionate burden in mediating between citizens and the state without receiving adequate recognition or resources. Addressing these constraints requires not only better-designed participatory tools, but also long-term investment in community capacity-building, including civic education, design literacy, and support for grassroots organizing so that participation becomes a sustained practice rather than a one-off event.

Looking ahead, advancing participatory spatial governance in public space design demands an integrated strategy that combines regulatory reform, institutional innovation, and context-sensitive design. Cities need clear legal frameworks that secure the right to participate and protect public space as a common good, coupled with governance mechanisms that embed participation across all project phases from agenda setting and design to implementation, monitoring, and adaptive management. Experimental approaches such as living labs, community design studios, and co-governance agreements can serve as transitional instruments to reconfigure power relations and build trust between state and society. Ultimately, overcoming the structural challenges identified in this review is essential for ensuring that participatory architecture does not remain

an aspirational discourse, but evolves into a robust governance practice capable of shaping more just, resilient, and democratically governed urban spaces.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that architectural design plays a decisive role in advancing good urban governance by shaping how citizens encounter, participate in, and interpret governance processes through their everyday spatial experiences. Well-designed public spaces characterized by inclusivity, accessibility, openness, and opportunities for collective use strengthen social interaction, enhance civic trust, and embody governance values such as transparency, accountability, and responsiveness. The findings show that architecture is not merely a physical arrangement but a spatial manifestation of governance, influencing how democratic practices unfold in public life. Conversely, exclusionary, privatized, or overly commercialized spatial configurations tend to weaken public engagement and undermine the social foundations of governance.

The core theoretical contribution of this article lies in conceptualizing governance as a spatial practice that is, the argument that principles of good urban governance must be materially expressed in the design, configuration, and management of public spaces rather than existing solely within institutional or procedural frameworks. This perspective integrates governance theory, spatial democracy, and architectural design, offering a multidisciplinary lens for understanding how space mediates power, participation, and public trust.

Practically, the findings highlight several implications for policymakers, urban planners, and architects. Urban governments should adopt participatory design as a standard component of planning procedures, ensuring that communities are involved in early-stage concept development, spatial programming, and ongoing management. Design guidelines should prioritize universal accessibility, multi-functional public spaces, and transparent spatial layouts to encourage visibility and civic interaction. Cities may also strengthen co-governance mechanisms such as community stewardship programs, co-management agreements, and participatory budgeting linked to spatial design to institutionalize shared responsibility for public space. Architects and urban designers, in turn, should approach public space as a governance infrastructure, intentionally crafting environments that facilitate dialogue, collective use, and social inclusion.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. As a literature-based conceptual analysis, it does not provide empirical evidence on how different social groups may experience participatory public spaces or how spatial design outcomes vary across socio-economic, cultural, or political contexts. Additionally, the mechanisms through which governance instruments such as participatory budgeting, design charrettes, or community co-management interact with spatial form remain underexplored in existing literature. Future research should therefore examine empirical cases that analyze: (1) how diverse groups (women, youth, the elderly, disabled communities) engage with participatory-designed spaces; (2) how specific governance tools shape spatial decisions and long-term stewardship; and (3) how contextual factors in Global South cities influence the translation of participatory design principles into governance outcomes.

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